SOUTHERN AFRICA:
AN EVIDENCE BASE FOR UNDERSTANDING THE CURRENT FOOD SECURITY CRISIS

Washington, October 7, 2005

1. How severe is the food security crisis in Southern Africa and where is the crisis located?

- Southern Africa is currently experiencing a food crisis in Zimbabwe, Malawi, parts of Mozambique, Zambia, Swaziland and Lesotho. At present there are no famine conditions, but unless maize imports are accelerated, and appeals adequately supported to avoid pipeline breaks, a localized price-driven famine threat could develop by November/December in Southern Malawi and Zimbabwe. For more details see country reports and alerts at www.fews.net.

2. What are the underlying causes of the crisis and how many people are affected?

- Initially, the crisis was the result of drought and reduced agricultural production in the 2004/05 season, layered on top of structural food insecurity and poverty in the region. In both countries this situation is exacerbated by the effects of HIV/AIDS, and, in Zimbabwe, by a failure of governance. The crisis is now worsening because of inadequate commercial imports, a slow international response, and sharply higher cereal prices.
- Vulnerability Assessment Committees (VACs) in the region led multi-agency analyses in mid-2005, and estimated that 702,000 MT of food assistance are required for 10,720,000 beneficiaries, with 4.6 and 4.9 million of them, respectively, in Malawi and Zimbabwe alone.

3. How does the severity of the current food security crisis in Southern Africa compare to 2002-03, the last bad year in the region?

- In overall scope, the 2002/03 crisis was more widespread. However, in 2004/05 there is a greater danger of a rapid deterioration of food access in Malawi and Zimbabwe as the peak of the hunger period approaches. Prices are increasing very sharply, and in Zimbabwe hyperinflation has been rekindled. Rising fuel costs and shortages of fuel and transportation are likely to worsen food access in coming months.
- In September 2002, the regional VACs estimated that 14,400,000 people in six countries would require 1,000,000 MT of cereals, compared to this year's 10,780,000 people in the same countries, requiring 702,000 MT.
- Regional availability of maize is greater in 2005, and prices in South Africa are still much lower at R820 per MT today, than in September 2002 when they reached R1,800 per MT, and in September 2003 when prices were R914 per MT.
- In the food crisis of 2002/03, household coping strategies in Zambia, Malawi and Zimbabwe included widespread consumption of wild and sometimes toxic foods. As of September 2005, there are few reports of household consumption of wild foods; however, other coping measures, such as skipping meals are already widespread.

4. How does the severity of the current food security problems in Malawi and Zimbabwe compare to Niger and countries in the Horn of Africa?

- The situation in Niger is improving rapidly; while the food security situation in Zimbabwe and Southern Malawi will continue to worsen until the next harvest in March 2006. However, the Southern Africa situation is less severe, in terms of malnutrition, than the current crises in Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan (Darfur and Bahr el Ghazal).

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- In Zimbabwe, general economic collapse, severe food and fuel shortages, hyperinflation, destruction of illegal settlements, and the effects of HIV/AIDS make the situation unlike any other food insecure country in Africa, with the highest potential to deteriorate into famine conditions.

5. How many people require assistance and where are they located?

- ***Zimbabwe***: Although the initial VAC estimate of people requiring assistance identified 2.88 million people, the price assumptions upon which that scenario was developed were surpassed within weeks of the assessment. Soaring prices, near macro-economic collapse, the return of hyperinflation and the effects of "*Operation Restore Order*" are expected to increase the number of people requiring food assistance in urban and rural areas to at least 4.9 million. The WFP PPRO program estimates that 258,801 MT of food aid assistance is required, but only 96,981 MT have been pledged, and so far, very little has been delivered.
- ***Malawi***: Up to 4.6 million people were estimated by the VAC to require humanitarian assistance this year, with the exact number depending on scenarios of market prices and macroeconomic conditions. Given current indicators, expectations are towards the upper end of this range, and could go over 5.0 million. This not only means more people, but a longer duration of assistance for each person and considerably more food needed. The highest concentration of people requiring assistance is in the southern part of the country. Currently, 270,000 MT of food aid are required, with a food aid gap of 106,000 MT remaining to be pledged, and an overall food gap of 400,000 MT when commercial import shortfalls are included. Of the total pledged assistance of 201,000 tons, more than 3/5 has yet to arrive in Malawi.

6. How large were the maize production shortfalls in Zimbabwe and Malawi?

- Production in Zimbabwe dropped from 1,100,000 MT in 2003/04 to 650,000 MT in 2004/05. In Malawi, maize production fell sharply from 1,733,125 MT in 2003/04 to 1,225,234 MT in 2004/05, a precipitous drop that is 36% lower than the recent 5-year production average.

7. What is the current maize availability situation in Southern Africa?

- Overall regional maize availability improved in 2004/05 compared to the preceding year, despite very poor production results in Zimbabwe and Malawi, because of South Africa's record harvest of 12.4 million MT. Combined with carryover stocks of nearly 3.0 million MT, there is currently an exportable maize surplus of 4.2 million MT in South Africa.
- The presence of large surpluses, good infrastructure and liberalized cereals trading, has transformed South Africa into the *de facto* strategic grain reserve for the entire sub-region. With export prices for South African maize quite low during the first part of 2005, the worst hit neighbors, Malawi and Zimbabwe, announced commercial import plans of 253,000 and 1,200,000 MT, respectively, but their action has not kept pace with intentions.

8. Why have Zimbabwe and Malawi not been taking advantage of South Africa's low prices and exportable surplus?

- So far, Zimbabwe's planned imports from South Africa have been averaging nearly 80,000 MT per month, with a total of 454,000 MT imported since April 30, 2005. This level of imports, surprising given Zimbabwe's lack of foreign exchange, still fails to meet consumption requirements and facilitate food access for most households by moderating out of reach prices. Imports must be increased to approximately 120,000 MT a month between now and June 2006 to ensure that minimal national requirements are met. The government has recently agreed to allow private traders to import maize and wheat, which could increase imports, but other restrictions, including a ban on reselling the cereals, and price controls on refined products, may limit any increase in imports by private traders in Zimbabwe.
- In Malawi, commercial imports have barely begun. The import target of 253,000 MT may now be unreachable, due to late tenders by the government, foreign exchange shortages, and transportation bottlenecks. Approximately 100,000 MT of maize is informally imported into Southern Malawi each year from Mozambique, but this alone will not dampen rapidly rising cereal prices if as formal sector imports continue to lag.

9. What is the current price situation and how is it affecting food access in the most affected areas?

- The most significant maize price increases in the region have been registered in markets in Malawi and Zimbabwe, and it is certain that the numbers of households in need in these two countries will rise beyond the mid-case scenarios developed in the country's VAC analyses.
- **Zimbabwe:** While prices vary in different markets, average maize prices have climbed over Z$2,200 per kg. Prices in areas of poor availability are currently over Z$3,500 per kg, with more remote markets reporting prices as high as Z$4,200 per kg. Because of the disruption to the informal sector and with fuel shortages limiting deliveries, supplies of basic foods are becoming scarce and prices out of reach of the poorest households.
- **Malawi:** Maize prices are currently much higher than is normally the case. In average years, prices generally vary between 10-15 kwacha per kg at this time of year. In southern Malawi, where the largest production shortfalls occurred, market prices are currently between 25-30 kwacha per kg and rising. Households in these regions are highly dependent on markets, and, if imports and food aid interventions remain inadequate, maize prices could rise much higher, as the hunger period extends into April/May 2006. Poor consumers are already waiting in long lines at ADMARC depots for subsidized maize, as they are unable to afford market prices, and ADMARC has rationed subsidized sales due to short supply.

10. Why are maize prices so high if there is a large regional cereal surplus?

- Reasons for the high prices observed in many southern African countries include poor domestic production, limited foreign exchange, government policies that restrict and delay private and government imports (e.g., import duties, government monopolies, uncertainty over government import plans), limited infrastructure capacity, and the high cost and shortages of fuel.
- Zimbabwe, Malawi and Zambia, where the highest prices are being recorded, are landlocked countries, and the cost of transport is high. However, tardiness on the part of governments in tendering, and in allowing the private sector to import, have also signaled to the markets that imports are lagging, adding to further inflation of prices.

11. What are the current malnutrition rates in Southern Africa, and what do they show?

- In Malawi, the southern region had the highest malnutrition rates in the region. The highest GAM rate recorded (July 2005) was 13% in Chiradzulu District. Balaka, Nsanje, Blantyre and Chikwawa districts all had GAM rates above 7.4%. Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) rates in Mulanje, Chiradzulu, Balaka and Blantyre were unacceptably and inexplicably high, above 5.8%.
- In Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Zambia, GAM and SAM rates in 2002/03 did not constitute a nutritional emergency. GAM rates in Malawi ranged from 1.4% to 5.2%; in Zimbabwe from 1.6% to 6.9%. However, with sharply worsening access ahead for the next six months, malnutrition rates in Zimbabwe and southern Malawi could worsen considerably.
- In Southern Africa, malnutrition data are not routinely collected and reported, so conclusions based on partial information need to be cautiously interpreted.

12. What actions should international agencies and the concerned countries be taking to address the situation?

- WFP will not launch a regional emergency appeal, but will instead expand its current PRRO to address assessed needs for both the chronically and acutely food insecure. This is consistent with the regional stakeholders' desire to move away from short term emergency responses in southern Africa in favor of recovery and longer term programs.
- Under the expanded PRRO, WFP plans to distribute 702,000 MT, of which 577,000 MT is cereals, between August 2005 and June 2006. This falls short of the aggregate VAC assessed emergency food aid needs of 813,000 MT. However, as of September 2005, of the 577,000 MT target, only 213,000 MT has been pledged, leaving a shortfall of 364,000 MT.

- Pipeline breaks could occur in the most affected countries as early as November/December. Unless pipeline issues are addressed, reduced daily rations would be probable by December/January. To fill the remaining gaps and avoid pipeline breaks, regional purchase from surpluses in South Africa is strongly encouraged because of cost considerations and the proximity of supply.
- The countries with the highest levels of food insecurity must act to increase commercial cereal supply and availability, with subsidized sales to control price increases. Because of transport bottlenecks and fuel shortages, the concerned governments will have to expedite measures to assure imports and targeted distribution to areas of need, or prices will continue to escalate. In Zimbabwe, an agreement on emergency distributions between the government, WFP and NGOs is essential if the response is to be on time. Without this agreement, monitoring the extent and depth of the Zimbabwe food crisis will be difficult.
- International agencies should consider responding quickly and positively to food commodity and funding requests from NGO entities like C-Safe because of their proven record in well targeted distribution. This could be especially important and timely in Zimbabwe, Lesotho and Zambia.

13. What will be the likely impacts if current levels of response do not improve?

- Currently moderate malnutrition rates could rise to more severe levels, similar to those being recorded in parts of the Horn of Africa. At the peak of the hunger season, larger numbers of households will resort to consuming sometimes toxic wild foods, or to sending some family members to the towns, or to main access roads in search of needed income. Risky behaviors can be expected that will put many more at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. Absenteeism from school can be expected to rise and could reach 70%, levels seen in 2002/03, as households are forced to rely on the labor of their children to assist in daily survival.
- Unless commercial imports and relief efforts are accelerated in the two most affected countries (Zimbabwe and Malawi), the most at risk among the vulnerable, the aged, chronically ill, widows, orphans and children could face starvation before the new harvest in May 2006.

14. Is the region prepared for the upcoming planting season?

- Three out of the last four seasons have seen below normal rainfall in southern portions of Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi. However, despite the slight optimism from the Southern Africa Climatic Outlook Forum (SARCOF) for a normal to above normal rainfall season in 2005/06, and the availability of inputs is of great concern.
- In terms of seasonal preparations which begins in mid October, information is limited at this time, but we can report the following:
  - **Zimbabwe**. Maize seed, fertilizers, fuel and spare parts are all in serious short supply. No more than 26,000 MT of maize seed are available to meet a requirement of 56,000 MT. Even the existing limited supply of maize seed is not being released on the market, with only a month to go before the rains, as the government and seed companies have yet to agree on prices. With virtually no fertilizer available in a country that used to use 450,000 MT annually, and fuel in extremely short supply, Zimbabwe's preparedness for the 2005/06 cropping season is probably the worst ever.
  - **Malawi**. Official figures on fertilizer imports are not yet available, although the government continues to assure the farm sector that supplies of all inputs will be adequate. With soils in Malawi exhausted of nutrients, fertilizers are crucial to increasing production. But government plans to subsidize fertilizers for poor households remains problematic, as many of the poor cannot afford even the subsidized prices, while others might sell the subsidized fertilizer to better-off farmers to pay off debts or for immediate food needs. The OCHA Flash Appeal of September 2005 also seeks $44.5 million for FAO to grant free fertilizers and seeds to 2 million farmers, but due to limited response and transportation and distribution lead times, it is unlikely that this program will assure inputs in time for this planting season.
  - **Zambia**. While there is sufficient seed and fertilizer in the country, only about 30% of farming households currently have access to seed and only 20% have acquired fertilizer. High costs of the

inputs and transport difficulties are the reasons generally cited for these problems. With the season in Northern Zambia about to begin, there is an urgent need to accelerate seed and fertilizer availability.

- **Mozambique**. Land preparation is underway as the onset of rains in coastal areas nears. An input availability assessment is underway, and supplies are thought to be adequate in the center and north of the country. In drought prone areas, seed and input trade fairs are underway, and these have worked well in Southern Mozambique in the past to channel critical inputs to areas hit by periodic drought.

15. As the hunger season approaches, what food security concerns require closer monitoring?

- Closer monitoring and reassessments of food needs are required especially in Malawi and Zimbabwe, to identify changes in access or the emergence of pre-famine indicators: cereal price monitoring, the progress of imports (formal and informal), malnutrition levels, fuel prices and macroeconomic policies to assess their impact on food security.
- The current agricultural season should also be monitored, including season preparations, input availability (both seed and fertilizer), rainfall, crop conditions and labor availability. Field visits are needed to assess seasonal progress.
- In Zimbabwe, the VAC is being strongly encouraged to re-assess needs, as the assumptions developed in the first round assessment have been proven seriously wrong.